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INTRODUCTION

> At a 1997 gallery talk in London, a young Black British woman asked Yinka Shonibare if he had a problem with being black. He replied that he didn't have a problem with being black, but he did have a problem with other people's ideas of what being black should mean for his work. (Hynes 2001, 65)

This encounter involving British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare speaks to this book's core question: What does black art look like? The relationship between race and art is relevant to production from various parts of the world. However, the way that discourse on racially based artistic categories has evolved, as well as the implications surrounding race-related artistic terms, often differs from one country to the next and even between regions. Art institutions, critics, art historians, and curators are highly influential in shaping public understandings of the correlation between race and art. Of particular importance is an audience's expectations of what black art should look like, which may trump the artist's attempt, if any, to express blackness in his or her work. The fact that some artists embrace race-related labels while others reject them reflects the diversity of artistic creativity and identity around the world.

With regard to Brazil, the relatively recent interest in black art[1] prompted anthropologist and curator Marta Heloísa Leuba Salum, at the turn of the twenty-first century, to state that "Afro-Brazilian art [was] a *contemporary* phenomenon" (2000, 113) (italics are mine). Her characterization is not wholly surprising given that most black Brazilian art falls into an interstice between studies of Modern and Contemporary Latin American art history and African art history, the latter of which has only gained international momentum and serious academic attention since 1950. One could easily argue that the relatively embryonic state of discourse on black Brazilian art, increasingly discussed as "Afro-Brazilian art" nationally and internationally in the past few decades, is an indication of both its perceived value to national artistic production and Afro-Brazilians' largely subordinate position in Brazilian society. Regardless, such cursory hypotheses do not begin to address a

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number of much deeper issues. Comprehensive exploration of black Brazilian art reveals that this body of work is innately enmeshed in a highly complex and interwoven series of social, economic, political, and historical factors that extend beyond the purview of a solely racially based discussion. The art cannot be extracted from its polyvalent environment and must be examined against this framework.

Intersections of Art, Politics, and Race: 1900–1950

The twentieth century encompassed numerous significant social and political developments in Brazil. It bridged the 1888 abolition of slavery and the 1988 centenary, which became a time to reflect on the country's African heritage and the current status of its African descendants. Over the course of the century, the population endured a political rollercoaster that included both democratic administrations and more than one dictatorship. In addition to the disparate types of rule, mid-century, the government relocated the capital from Rio de Janeiro to the recently constructed city of Brasília—a symbol of the "new" Brazil. Of course, throughout the decades, artistic expression was also almost always affected by changes that took place in the social and political arenas.

The surge of cultural nationalism that occurred in the first half of the twentieth century largely molded the national racial ideology that existed well into the second half of the century, and even affected the trajectory of race-related artistic production. In the first decades of the 1900s, Brazil experienced a growth in cultural nationalism due, in part, to social and economic changes brought about by the abolition of slavery in 1888 (Franco 1967, 69–102). Several states had sizeable Afro-Brazilian populations, including the Northeastern region of Bahia, which was the strongest center of African influence due to its sea trade with West Africa and religious exchange with Nigeria, in particular (Barata 1957, 55–56; Matory 2005, 46–47, 118–119; Pierson 1942, 239). Yet, even after the abolition of slavery, the white, European-influenced portion of the population remained dominant socially, culturally, and politically.

This hegemony extended to national artistic production. For example, Brazil's young white writers, artists, dancers, and musicians were active participants in the move away from European cultural affinities, fusing modern or international styles with decidedly local subjects in the 1920s (Ades 1989, 132–136; Barnitz 2001, 56–57; Mesquita 1996, 202–205). In contrast, black

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art existed as an area of production that intellectuals, rather than the individuals who actually created the art, explored and articulated. Unlike the mainstream artistic producers, most black artists created sacred work within the Afro-Brazilian religious communities, which were concentrated in the Northeast. Social scientists Nina Rodrigues and Artur Ramos included this work in their studies under the label *arte negra* or "black art" (Ramos 1949, 189–212; Rodrigues 1904/1988). The generic designation did not explicitly relate to the artist's race, but rather described a body of production that was unskilled, outside the European artistic tradition, and religious in content.

In the 1930s, President Getúlio Vargas made nationalism, including cultural nationalism, a priority in his plan to unify the country. During his dictatorship (1930–1945), he supported cultural activities, but only "as manifestations of state power and a way of promoting nationalism" (Mesquita 1996, 206). Especially for blacks, the African-influenced religious communities were important fonts for cultural manifestations in the 1930s. However, Vargas decided what fell within the parameters of national unity and repressed everyone and everything that he considered outside them and a challenge to his agenda. Under his rule, the police regularly confiscated liturgical objects and artworks from the Afro-Brazilian religious communities, which often ended up in police museums, sometimes jailed practitioners, and required the different groups to apply for a permit through the official Division of Games and Diversions (Brown 1986, 146–147; Carvalho 2005, 42; Lühning 1996). Further, although blacks had formed an organized movement, the Frente Negra Brasileira (Brazilian Black Front), and had gone on to register the Front as a political unit, in 1937 Vargas exercised his power by simply shutting down it and all other opposition parties (Sheriff 2001, 187).

Despite the government's repressive tactics, a group of intellectuals organized the First and Second Afro-Brazilian Congresses in Recife (1934) and Salvador (1937), respectively, to explore Brazilian society's African cultural influences. These Congresses largely focused on national issues, but also went beyond solely Afro-Brazilian topics to address questions related to the broader African Diaspora. The intellectuals hoped that by presenting African influences in a positive light, they would change the prevailing negative view of such aspects. However, the police, under Vargas, continued their oppressive practices.

In the 1940s, government-supported artwork made during the dictatorship was characterized by benign nationalistic themes. Subsequently, wealthy white patrons established new spaces to house cultural expression, including the São Paulo Art Museum (1947) and the Museums of Modern Art in São

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Paulo (1948) and Rio de Janeiro (1949). At the same time, Afro-Brazilians remained marginalized from the mainstream arts and culture scene. Instead, they formed their own cultural groups such as the Teatro Experimental do Negro (Black Experimental Theater) or TEN, created in 1944 in Rio de Janeiro, as a means to promote social progress for blacks and involve them in creative expression.

Intersections of Art, Politics, and Race: 1950s–1984

Midway through the twentieth century, Brazil's urban centers became sites of major political and social changes. There was a largely urban population boom, and economic resources were concentrated in a few cities, especially São Paulo. President Juscelino Kubitschek (1956–1961) moved the capital to Brasília in April 1960. Famed architect Oscar Niemeyer designed the city around the shape of an airplane, a plan that represented the dynamism and boldness associated with the creation of the new center of government in the interior of the country (Barnitz 2001, 184–188).

The same energy that surrounded these key political and social developments also characterized national cultural expression. Brazilian artists in the southern cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro began to participate in *Concretismo* (Concrete art), which emphasized the scientific and mathematical over realism and nationalism (Mesquita 1996, 212). Around the same time, art critic Clarival do Prado Valladares began to write about a small number of black artists in the Northeast who worked outside the religious communities (Valladares 1963a, 1963b, 1966a). However, individuals in São Paulo's and Rio's art circles were not concerned with these regional artists, as their work did not reflect the Concrete aesthetic.

Ironically, events taking place on the African continent in the 1960s prompted the Brazilian government to give greater consideration to the country's African heritage. Léopold Senghor, the first president of independent Senegal, held the First World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in 1966. He invited other African countries and also nations with substantial African-descendant populations to showcase their black art that employed aesthetics based on the principles of Négritude, the international black movement that he had helped define in the 1930s (Harney 2002, 19).[2] In FESTAC, Brazil saw an opportunity to further expand its historically rooted cultural connections to Africa via the Atlantic slave trade into trade partnerships with newly independent African nations.

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